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### The Feast of the Holy Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

As we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family during this Octave - this eight-day celebration - of Christmas Day, we see the model of every family. Indeed, every family is meant to be a holy family, a family marked by love, faith and devotion to the will of God. The family is where we first experience love; it is where we learn the fundamentals of the faith; it is where we learn the discernment of the will of God.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us:

In the Gospel we do not find discourses on the family but an *event* which is worth more than any words: God *wanted to be born and to grow up in a human family*. In this way he consecrated the family as the first and ordinary means of his encounter with humanity.<sup>1</sup>

The task for every family, then, is to resemble, as much as possible, the Holy Family of Nazareth.

My own early experience of family life was somewhat different than that of most children. Before I was five years of age my mother developed a brain cancer that confined her to a hospital bed in our home. As such, mom was always near, even if unable to care for my brother and I. Some of my fondest memories are of mom reading stories to us as we lay on her bed.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Angelus* Address, 31 December 2006.

The care of the home was left largely to my father, who stayed home to care for my mother; dad, too, was always near. Their marriage had not been easy and it certainly was not the happy and pleasant dream they must have once had. They had already lost a child - my twin, Matthew - the day after our birth.

Though I certainly did not realize it at the time, I learned from my mother - from a very early age - a certain patience in suffering; not once can I remember her complain about her lack of health. And from my father I learned the value of loyalty; how easy it would have been for him to leave, but he stayed with my mother, keeping the commitment he made. Both of these lessons have served me well and will help me to be - with the grace of God - a holy priest, according to his will and pleasure.

I do not mean to give the impression that my parents were saintly individuals; they certainly had their sins, as do we all. I simply mean to emphasize that certain key aspects of character are learned best - for good or for ill - from the family.

My own family was irreparably wounded when, in 1986, my father died; I was almost eight years old. My brother and I moved in with my father's sister and her family. I distinctly remember a conversation she and I had: she knew she and her husband could not take the place of my parents, nor would they

try. Nonetheless, my brother and I were welcome in their home and they extended their love to us.

There are many today who try to convince us that it is not the make-up of the family that matters, but the love that is shared. This is true as far as it goes, but, from my own experience, I know the great importance of the biological family; it cannot be denied. It is fundamental and irreplaceable to the good of humanity. Children have the right to grow in a family with a mother and a father; if we would stop making excuses for our failings and sins we would all recognize this.

This is not to say that some situations are beyond repair; rather, it is to highlight the great responsibility that each of us has for and toward the family. We know that the family "comes into being from the responsible and definitive "yes" of a man and a woman, and it continues to live from the conscious "yes" of the children who gradually join it."<sup>2</sup> It is this commitment made by a husband and wife to live in love until death that is the beginning of the family; the family springs forth from love.

Regretfully, the family is today confronted by assaults from every side. Far too many families are broken and weak.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2008*, 6.

What we need today are more families who model their lives on that of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

What is it that is characteristic of the Holy Family? If we look to the window depicting the Holy Family here in this church, we see a glimpse of the life of the home in Nazareth. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are depicted in the workshop. Mary stands in the background with her needlework, while Joseph takes a brief break from his labor. Both of their eyes are fixed on Jesus, who, even as a young boy, holds a small cross. This is what distinguishes the Holy Family: their attention is focused on Jesus Christ, who gives meaning and direction to their lives.

If our families are to be truly holy families - families marked by love, peace and happiness - then we, too, must look to Jesus Christ and build our lives upon his solid foundation.

Looking to the home in Nazareth we see the beauty of silence and simplicity. In the silence of their home Jesus, Mary and Joseph prayed together and individually.

A life of simplicity naturally flowed from this atmosphere of quiet reflection. Mary and Joseph knew that love cannot be adequately communicated through material things. They communicated their love for each other and for Jesus by their attentive presence and concern for each other. It is a lesson for us all that our children do not need the newest and latest of everything; that they do not need what we did not have; that

we cannot really know our children if we only see them for a few brief minutes each day.

For parents, Mary and Joseph provide the perfect model of mothering and fathering. They will teach parents how to communicate love to their children; they will show parents how to instill the faith in their children; they will teach parents how to discern the will of God for themselves and for their children.

For children who are separated from parents through death, divorce or other circumstances of life, Mary and Joseph will adopt them as their own. Under their guidance and protection we will know the joy of being loved in the communion of saints. They will watch over us as they watched over Jesus, helping us to grow in wisdom and grace.

How do we move forward from here? The answer is simple: we, as families and as individuals, need to recover the simple things of life. Would that families today would recover that spirit of prayer! Would that the family dinner return! Would that discipline and work be honored and respected!

Love is a sacrifice. Returning to the core values of family life will not be easy, but it will be worth it. Let each of us look to the Holy Family. They will lead us all to Jesus Christ. From them, each of us can receive love; each of us can learn the faith; each of us can discern God's will for us.